

# Referendum Debate Riposte

Garry Coutts

## Keywords

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## Referendum debate

Mark Smith's case for independence boils down to:

- there is a distinct Scottish approach to social welfare
- our ability to pursue this approach is compromised by Westminster
- the devolution settlement (and anything short of full independence) will not allow this tradition to flourish

Placing the current debate in the context of policy development since the Reformation is an interesting approach. It certainly allows the author a wealth of material from which to pick examples. However, I query whether the historical record actually shows there is such a distinct cultural difference in social welfare policy as implied.

I am no historian but am aware that going back to the 1500s communities and countries were organising schemes of relief for the poor. Elizabethan England introduced their first Poor Law in 1572 with Scotland copying it two years later. Different approaches have been proposed, implemented, amended and superseded across the UK regularly ever since. Some of these were draconian, some compassionate. There was also variation across the country. One of the most interesting schemes I stumbled across was the Speerhamland system introduced in Berkshire in 1785 to give relief to impoverished labourers. It became discredited when it was criticised for encouraging employers to pay unduly low wages, forcing workers to claim relief at the taxpayer's expense - sound familiar?

We have seen diverse approaches to social welfare policy over the centuries and indeed across the world. Some of those introduced in Scotland can undoubtedly be looked at as being progressive steps in the development of modern social welfare practice; however, we can also see some developments that were barbaric and inhumane. It takes a leap of faith, if not nationalistic hubris, to presume Scotland sits separately and proudly at the apex of social policy development but, in any case, it is little more than an intellectual parlour game in relation to the referendum.

In highlighting the brief but much quoted Thatcher statement 'there is no such thing as society' as an indicator of the differences between the countries, Mark is stretching things a bit far. If Thatcher's position was anathema to Scots, why does Cameron's 'Big Society' not resonate with us? After all, it embodies much of current policy in Scotland including the promotion of community resilience, first responder schemes and dementia-friendly communities, etc. The truth is that Thatcher's comment and Cameron's Big Society PR stunt, as well as the Pavlovian response to them, mask the complexity of the underlying

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policy issues. To suggest isolated quotations mark a fracture line between Scottish and English attitudes is not credible.

Our ability to pursue our own policy is important but highlighting Kilbrandon and the creation of the Children's Panel system is a little curious. Here was a distinctive Scottish policy developed and implemented in Scotland without interference from Westminster. The failure to fully implement Kilbrandon's recommendation on social education was not because of the dead hand of London. If there was a dead hand it came from vested interests within Scotland. Local government, seeing their power and responsibilities in this area being subsumed by the panel system, and directors of education not being keen to take on a shared responsibility for this group of young people killed off this idea. The creation of a separate social work department and the more recent evolutionary approach through Curriculum for Excellence, community planning and this year's Children's Act have kept the original intention alive. And all achieved under the previous and current constitutional settlements. In light of all the above, I am indeed tempted to ask 'What's the Problem?'

The answers Mark puts forward to this question are not compelling. He continues to look at issues that predate the current constitutional settlement and does not even make reference to the 2012 Scotland Act that will, at last, bring tax and spending decisions back to Scotland.

His analysis of the trend for heavier-handed criminal justice during the McConnell administration is more relevant. I agree with his conclusion that this was a retrograde step and one that did not serve anyone well; however, it is important to recognise the context in which these policies were formed. It was not New Labour or Westminster that were the loudest voices in wanting a crackdown on criminality and delinquency. It was the mainly working class communities who were the victims of this behaviour that pressed politicians of all persuasions to 'do something'. Car stealing, housebreaking, drug dealing, casual vandalism and other small-scale but devastating crime was creating misery for hundreds of thousands of people. The pressure for a policy response was intense. While social workers and many liberal commentators argued the futility of the measures introduced, politicians of all parties, seeking votes in Scotland's poorest communities, were unable to resist. As is often the case, policy made in such a pressure cooker is often bad policy.

While there has been a change in direction in Scotland under the SNP it has been matched in other parts of the UK. But the heavy-handedness of our policing continues unabated. That you are more likely to be stopped and searched in Scotland than in New York and that there are now, as a matter of routine, armed police on our streets are not indicators of a liberal society.

I agree with the comment from the Jimmy Reid Foundation that we 'have chosen not to tackle poverty'. But who is to be blamed for making that choice? My case is that it is Scottish politicians, elected by Scots, who have continually failed to make progressive choices. We have immense power to tackle inequality now but are not doing so. We must look to what we can do and not be obsessed with the things we can't; particularly when we can do so much and are prevented from doing so little. We certainly don't need independence or even a referendum to start challenging 'ruling ideas'.

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To fail to make use of these manifest opportunities and instead focus on a constitutional issue is a sad indictment on us as a nation. We are not oppressed. There are no significant differences of social attitude between ourselves and the rest of the UK. We share a common language and heritage. And we have a system of devolved administration that allows us to shape distinct policy in Scotland, for Scotland. So let's get on with it.

Like Mark, I draw inspiration from Henderson's *Freedom Come All Ye*. If ever there was an anthem that promoted internationalism and eschewed narrow nationalism that is it. I will feel perfectly comfortable and 'at home wi' freedom' as I go into the ballot box on September 18<sup>th</sup> and vote NO.

## End Notes

Garry Coutts has been involved in public life for over 30 years holding positions on a number of NDPBs in both the health and social care sectors. He was also an elected councillor in both Highland and Edinburgh. He is writing in a personal capacity.

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